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AUTHOR Tighe, Mary Ann
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ABSTRACT

While English teachers want students to enjoy reading, to appreciate the beauty of literature, and to recognize the universality of the classics, many adolescent students do not become interested in the aesthetic aspect of literature until they are beyond high school age. Some works, outside the traditional literary canon, speak more directly to adolescent readers' interests and needs, provide a way of engaging students' interest and, because they are well written, offer a source for the development of reading and discussion skills. Such books include Cynthia Voight's "On Fortune's Wheel," Mildred Taylor's "Roll of Thunder," and Sue Ellen Bridgers' "Home before Dark." (A chart detailing Lawrence Kohlberg's stages of moral development, an evaluation form for young adult literature, and a list of 13 resources for children's and young adults' literature are attached.) (RS)

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USING YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE TO MOTIVATE RELUCTANT READERS OR WHAT DO YOU DO WHEN THEY HAVEN'T READ THEIR ASSIGNMENT

Mary Ann Tighe

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USING YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE TO MOTIVATE RELUCTANT READERS OR WHAT DO YOU DO WHEN THEY HAVEN'T READ THEIR ASSIGNMENT

Mary Ann Tighe, Troy State University, Nov., 1991

"Too many of the students who leave our schools are book haters and functional illiterates" (111). This quotation comes from a text on the teaching of high school English by Stephen Tchudi and Diana Mitchell.

Yet, when we establish our goals and objectives for literature, we are striving for the opposite effect--we want our students to enjoy reading, to appreciate beauty in literature, to recognize the universality of the classics. What happens to turn our goals and objectives upside down?

The answer may lie in our selection of texts, those texts held to be a part of the traditional literary canon. Robert Carlsen, author of Books and the Teen-Age Reader, points out that teens use literature in their search for identity. This may not be what English teachers see as the function of literature, but, nevertheless, that is how teen-agers use it (12-13).

They are beginning to seek independence from parents and are coming under the influence of peers.

They are coping with the physiological changes in their bodies--they are concerned about being too tall, too thin, or too fat.

They are establishing relationships with the opposite sex, seeking a vocation, and establishing value systems.

And these are the issues they want to read about (13-17).

According to Carlsen, readers between the ages of 13 and 15 are very self-centered. They want to identify and empathize with the protagonist.

Between the ages of 16 and 18 they become less egocentric, developing an interest in social problems, religion, and the value systems of others.

But it is only as mature adult readers that they become interested in the aesthetic aspects of literature (9). That is, juniors and seniors in college may be ready for literary analysis and critiques but not students in junior or even in senior high school classes.

Yet, too often in our classrooms, we ask them to struggle with books that have little connection with their own lives, and we require them to focus on literary analysis which holds little meaning for them.

Today I am going to suggest some works outside the traditional literary canon which may speak more directly to reader interests and needs. And one source for those books is young adult literature. It provides a way of engaging students' interest and, because they are well written, they offer a source for the development of reading and discussion skills.

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Donelson and Neilson define young adult literature as "anything that readers between the approximate ages of twelve and twenty choose to read (as opposed to what they may be coerced to read for class assignments)" (13).

For example, they might select this book by Cynthia Voight--On Fortune's Wheel--a romantic adventure story set in a mystical medieval setting. It takes us on a journey with the heroine--Birle, and it begins with her first impetutuous act. When, in the middle of the night, she see a shadowy figure stealing her family's boat, she jumps aboard and begins a jorrney that takes her to a new land where she is captured only to be sold as a slave. One of the most dramatic scenes in the book is that when Birle is brought to the slave market. (Read p. 124). But Birle remains strong and eventually wins her freedom and the love of a young earl as well as a sense of independence she has not known before.

I confess--some of these books are also freely chosen for reading by people over the age of 20.

In the next few minutes I would like to look at two other young adult novels and suggest ways of incorporating them into the classroom.

Roll of Thunder by Mildred Taylor was published in 1976. It is the story of the Logans, a Black family struggling to survive in Mississippi in the 1930"s. It is told from the point of view of Cassie Logan, a 12-year-old, whose family is strong and loving. She has no sense of inferiority and no timidity, and she comes of age during one strife-filled year. When she enters a local store and the owner waits on all the White customers before her, she points out this inequity and is quickly removed from the store. Outside, when she accidentally bumps into Lillian Jean Simms, Lilliam Jean who is White demands an apology, and her father threatens Cassie with force. Just then her grandmother, Big Ma appears and insists that Cassie apologize. Cassie does so, but she is humiliated. She doesn't realize the implications or the danger of this incident.

Other tribulations of the Logan family in particular and of Blacks in general are vividly portrayed. The Black children walk to their segregated school, and, as they do, the school bus carrying the White children deliberately forces them off the road and splatters them with mud. They learn of two Black men who are doused with gasoline and burned for speaking to a White woman, and after hearing stories about the Night Riders, they live in fear that their family will be visited in the middle of the night. Cassie's father is ambushed and badly injured because he organizes a boycott of the local grocery story.

And at the end of the novel, the Logans burn their own crops to save their friend TJ from being lynched for a murder he did not commit. But through it all, the reader knows that this family will survive, and they do in the sequel, Let the Circle Be Unbroken.

Page 1 of your handout has a guide for developing discussion questions that move beyond simple recall or comprehension.

Another novel that would be enjoyed by older students is Home Before Dark by Sue Ellen Bridgers. Bridgers is an award-winning author, noted for her excellent characterization of both young people and adults.

Home Before Dark is the story of a family of migrant workers. It begins with the family traveling by car to NC. James Earl Willis is bringing his family back to the town and the house where he grew up. As a young man, he had left home, joined the army, married Mae, and slipped into the gypsy-like life style of an itinerant farm worker. James Earl and Mae have four children who have never known any home other than the dilapidated old car which carries them from one farm to another. Stella is fourteen, their oldest child, and the focus of the story.

Back in North Carolina, James Earl's younger brother Newton has worked hard and turned the family farm into a prosperous business. And now, after 16 years, James Earl suddenly reappears. With no hesitation, Newton and his wife Anne welcome them, take them in, give them work on the farm and a place to live. It's only a small tenant house, but Stella is captivated by her first real home.

Years of traveling have given Stella a self confidence and maturity beyond her 14 years. Two boys are attracted to her. Toby is the son of another tenant farmer. He loves Stella, but they both realize he is not her equal simply because she bears the Willis name. Toby has a rival, Rodney Biggers, who has a car, fashionable clothes, and a good allowance which he spends freely on Stella. But Stella is still drawn to Toby, and, when Rodney sees them kissing, he arranges for Toby to be attacked and beaten, hoping to frighten him away from Stella.

But while Stella is learning to love the land and her house and is just beginning to recognize and enjoy the power she has over the two boys, her mother Mae is bitterly unhappy. She feels ill at ease and misses the nomadic life. Before she can convince James Earl to leave, she is struck and killed by a flash of lightning. Not long after her death, James Earl meets and courts an old

acquaintance, Maggie Grover, who owns a local store. When they decide to marry and live in Maggie's big house in the center of town, Stella refuses to leave the little tenant house, the only home that she has known. But slowly she begins to realize that it is her family, not just a house, that is important, and she rejoins James Earl and Maggie with her younger brothers and sisters.

As in most classical literature, Stella, the heroine, faces three traditional conflicts: (1) protagonist against self, (2) against another person, and (3) against society. First, she has conflicts within herself. She likes Toby, and she recognizes his many admirable qualities: he is intelligent, courteous, and loyal. But her sense of superiority as a Willis holds her back and draws her toward Rodney, a much weaker and flawed character. And Stella is stubborn; she refuses to move out of the tenant house and insists on living there alone.

And, secondly, Stella is not hesitant about engaging in conflicts with other people. When her mother wants no part of their new home, Stella takes over and makes it her own. A furious Stella dismisses Rodney when she learns what he has done to Toby. And when Maggie gently tries to win Stella's acceptance as her father's wife, Stella holds back until she herself feels ready to make the change.

But Stella's biggest conflict is with society and the role that was thrust upon her as a member of a migrant farm worker family. She refuses to accept this life, and when her father offers them a way out, she takes the opportunity and establishes herself quickly in a new life style.

These are conflicts with which young readers can identify. And if Carlsen is correct, it is a book they will enjoy reading. And based upon contemporary literary criticism, it is a book well worth reading in the English classroom.

I truly believe that young adult literature can make a difference in our students' lives, that it can help them to become literate and enthusiastic readers.

The chart at the bottom of page 1 is a guide for selecting books for classroom or individualized reading assignments.

On Page 2 is a list of references if you are interested in finding out more about young adult literature.

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Mary Ann Tighe
Troy State University
Troy, AL

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Lawrence Kohlberg's Stages of Moral Development

Preconventional (Self-interest)

1. Obedience and Punishment Orientation
   Fear of punishment, do whatever is needed to avoid it.
2. Instrumental Relativist Orientation
   Based on meeting own needs rather than adhering to principles
   Involves manipulating others to meet own needs

Conventional (Relationships with others)

3. Interpersonal Concordance Orientation
   To be socially accepted, must do deeds that please others; peer groups are important
4. Authority and Social-Order Maintaining Orientation
   Obey society's rules out of duty or obligation; put social order over personal feelings

Post-Conventional (Centers on universal principles of right or wrong)

5. Contractual Legalistic Orientation
   Follows rules that govern society as a whole rather than special interest groups
   Can change rules through socially accepted procedures.
   Focuses on human rights and dignity
6. Conscience or Principle Orientation
   Motivated by integrity, honest with oneself and others, unconditional love and self-sacrifice

Keller, Rodney D. "Robert Cormier and Kohlberg's Levels of Morality." The Leaflet: Journal of the New England Association of Teachers of English 84.2 (1985): 21-28.

Evaluation Form for Young Adult Literature

Quality		Popularity	
5Q:	Hard to imagine it being better written.	5P:	Every young adult was dying to read it today.
4Q:	Better than most, marred only by occasional lapses.	4P:	Broad general young adult interest
3Q:	Readable without serious defects	3P:	Will appeal with pushing.
2Q:	A little better editing or or work by the author would have made it 3Q.	2P:	For the young adult reader with a special interest in the subject.
1Q:	Hard to understand how it got published.	1Q:	No young adult will read unless forced to for grade.

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Resources for Children's and Young Adult Literature

Texts

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Probst, Robert E. Response and Analysis: Teaching Literature in Junior and Senior High School. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, Heinemann, 1988.

Sutherland, Zena, and May Hill Arbuthnot. Children and Books, 8th edition. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1991.

Periodicals

ALAN Review. Assembly on Literature for Adolescents, National Council of Teachers of English, 1111 Kenyon Road, Urbana, Il 61801. $15.00 for three issues.

Booklist. American Library Association, 50 East Huron St., Chicago, IL 60611. $51.00 for twenty-two issues.

English Journal. National Council of Teachers of English, 1111 Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801. $35.00 for eight issues.

Horn Book. The Horn Book, Inc., Park Square Building, 31 James Ave., Boston, MA 02116. $32.00 for six issues.

Journal of Reading. International Reading Association, 800 Barksdale Road, Box 8139, Newark, DE 19711-8139. $33.00 for eight issues.

Language Arts. National Council of Teachers of English, 1111 Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801. $35.00 for eight issues.

Dr. Mary Ann Tighe
Troy State University